
Having Fun and Making Friends in an International Environment

By
Robert J. Hoffer
National Defense University

Introduction

The very popular and highly successful English Conversation Group (ECG) was born out of a wonderful combination of necessity and opportunity during National Defense University's 1999-2000 school year. Since then, ECG has built a proud tradition of providing a venue where people come together, make friends, have fun, support one another and make a memorable year. The return on this investment of time, energy and effort has been substantial.



Class photo of international military students.

The English Conversation Group is a loose knit, all volunteer organization that allows the spouses and families of the International Fellows enrolled at National Defense University (NDU) the opportunity for social interaction with each other and with a small group of facilitators in a supportive, non-threatening environment. The program affords people from diverse backgrounds the chance to learn from and about one another while getting to know each other as people through general conversation, various team building exercises and other types of cultural exchange. This two-way conduit of open communication is based on mutual respect, honesty, trust, camaraderie and friendship.

Prior to the establishment of English Conversation Group, the major hole in the International Fellows Program had been the fact that there were very little organized activities for the families once they were settled in country. This left the spouses of the international officers



International friendships are some of the benefits of international class studies and international English Conversation Group participation.

far away from home, separated from their family and friends, to learn about life in America by day time television. A bored, lonely and unhappy spouse is not good in any culture.

The building blocks for the solution to this problem are already in place. We are surrounded by the top people from around the world; in an idyllic setting at Fort McNair, outside the gate is Washington, D.C., one of the most exciting cities on the planet. Putting all of this together through English Conversation Group empowers people to get involved, enjoy themselves and make the most of their time.

The English Conversation Group is not an English as a second language class. For the spouses of the International Fellows students, the English Conversation Group is a safe and comfortable environment where they can practice and polish their American-English language skills, while forming a true and positive impression of the United States. For the Americans, it is a golden opportunity to make friends, have fun and see their country through new eyes. All participants have the chance to learn about one another's countries, customs, families, dress, foods, holiday traditions and so forth. This kind of interaction opens doors of communication, tears down walls of misunderstanding and builds bridges of friendship.



International students with their wives at an English Conversation Group social function.

Just Who are These Guys Anyway?

The National Defense University is the top school of its kind in the world. The international students are attending NDU at the invitation of the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff. They are invited to come to the United States along with their families to learn about America, wars and all.

The International Fellows are selected to come to the National Defense University because they are the top performers from their various countries and are being groomed for very high-level positions within their governments. We can expect to read in the newspaper someday that one of them was named Chief of Staff of their armed forces or to some other top job within their government. In fact, it would not be surprising to learn that a member of English Conversation Group went on to become First Lady of her country.

The Hard Working Volunteer Facilitators

All English Conversation Group facilitators are volunteers. They are recruited from the National War College Spouse Club (NWCSC), the Industrial College of the Armed Forces Spouse Club (ICAFSC) as well as National Defense University faculty and staff. Facilitators are expected to diplomatically discuss and answer questions on a wide range of subjects. Topics include but, are not limited too, questions on American-English pronunciation, commonly used idioms and slang as well as current events, holiday traditions, and the always complex and the usually hard to explain American lifestyle.



An English Conversation Group facilitator with a group of International Students.

Working as a facilitator is a very real commitment. The mental gymnastics that are sometimes involved can make participation an intellectually challenging as well as immensely rewarding undertaking. The English Conversation Group is a lot of fun, a terrific way to make some interesting new friends and a great way to learn a little bit about yourself, your country and the world around you.

How the English Conversation Group is Organized

The English Conversation Group does not have a president, secretary or any officers at all, nor do we follow *Roberts Rules of Order* to run the meetings. Using no titles, or rank, all participants are equal. English Conversation Group meetings are held on a weekly basis in an informal and collegial atmosphere. Sufficient notice is given for special events such as guest speakers, offsite tours and various other exciting activities.

The group is all-inclusive and the meetings are run in a manner that allows everybody equal access to the floor. Sharing observations on cooking, eating, shopping, the weather, getting around town, tourist highlights, religious, secular, and family holiday traditions are all highly acceptable topics of conversation.

Setting the Agenda

Each new English Conversation Group class develops its own personality, which sets both the pace and the agenda. Nothing about the program is cut in stone. It has been changing, evolving and reinventing itself since inception. English Conversation Group is a diverse group of talented, intelligent, interesting and highly motivated people with an extremely wide range of life

experiences. Drawing on this reservoir and capitalizing on new ideas whenever they are suggested is a proven formula for stimulating involvement. Not every idea is doable nor will they all work out one-hundred percent of the time. But, we are not afraid to try new things. Is English Conversation Group stodgy and inflexible? Never! Is it new and improved? Yes, always!



English Conversation Group facilitators and International students participating in group activities shown above and study groups shown below.



The program starts in September, soon after the children go back to school. The first meetings are icebreakers. My name is, I am from, I am a person with a family, job, hobbies, interests, etcetera. As soon as possible, we start team building by encouraging car-pooling and do an offsite to learn how to use public transportation. We learn to work together in small groups by devoting an entire program to trying to understand the complexities of American-English idioms (this is more difficult for the facilitators than it may seem). Some early just for fun team building activities like a bowling offsite have also been very popular.

Each and every participant is strongly encouraged to step forward and get involved and lead the conversation group by making a presentation. Presentations are a great way to build a sense of ownership in English Conversation Group. The first presentations of the class year center on

explanations and discussions of holiday traditions like Halloween, Thanksgiving, Ramadan, Hanukkah, and Christmas. Country briefings have proven to be extremely popular and are brought in to the mix during the second semester.



International student sharing information about her country with the English Conversation Group.

International students and their families participating in a tour around Washington, D.C.



Why Does the English Conversation Group Work?

The English Conversation Group is a successful program for three reasons. First and foremost is the support and participation of the spouses of National Defense University senior officers. This support is a force multiplier that gives the program a tremendous boost in credibility, opens doors of opportunity and provides the catalyst that makes things happen.

Second is the input of the facilitators. They are an essential component to this success story. The facilitators join the group out of a sense of pride and patriotism as well as a desire to get involved. They also put a face on the Americans for the International Fellows.

Third is the overwhelming acceptance of the English Conversation Program by the international spouses. They enjoy taking advantage of the chance to represent their country,

culture, heritage and family and leave a lasting positive impression on people from around the world.

A year in the National Defense University environment is a profoundly positive, life changing experience. It is the proverbial golden opportunity. English Conversation Group gives the participants the chance to get involved, play a part and take full advantage of the opportunities that are available.

Conclusion

The National Defense University has a rich history of successful experiences training individuals from militaries and governments of nations around the globe. As we continue to invite international students to study within these walls; they will continue to serve as representatives of their nations and will remain friends and allies with whom we can rely on in the future.

Our team at the International Student Management Office of National Defense University and those of us who work in the training activities of security assistance are familiar with the great efforts that go into assisting other nations one person at a time. We often struggle to not only quantify but to qualify the results of our efforts. As we sift through numbers and facts and create reports we are reminded of the words we heard an international student say, or the relationships we watched form and blossom. We remember spouses from opposite sides of the globe who formed tight bonds and supported each other in their families' joys and trials in a foreign land and the children who learned English better than their parents. Most importantly we think of the minds of the international students we watched grow and sometimes change. We realize that in the end we are not simply training we are winning hearts and influencing minds.

About the Author

Robert J. Hoffer has been a railroad conductor for thirty years and is currently working Amtrak trains out of Washington, D.C. He is former Vice President of the National War College Spouse Club, Class of 2000 and has been involved with the English Conversation Group since inception. He has donated thousands of volunteer of hours towards this effort.